

Introduction to the Special Issue on Research on E-Service

Citation for published version (APA):

de Ruyter, J. C. (2002). Introduction to the Special Issue on Research on E-Service. *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 13(5), 410-411.

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2002

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

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Research on e-service

With the proliferation of the Internet in marketing, it has become clear that mere Web presence, as well as the information and sales functions of e-commerce, need to be supplemented by electronic service, or e-service. In fact, it has been suggested that as e-commerce is gradually advancing into the next phase, it is essential to accompany the focus on "high tech" with "high touch". The infusion of information and communication technology is changing the nature of the service encounter with far-reaching consequences for both service employees and customers. Furthermore, while technology providers play an increasingly important role in the e-service arena, the role of such third-party suppliers has been left largely under-researched. Do these companies practice what they preach? And, what happens when e-service measurement moves up the supply chain? Questions that have been left virtually unanswered in the literature thus far. Finally, for researchers the rise of e-services may necessitate the re-conceptualization of a number of established core concepts. The nature of customer evaluative judgments about e-services is likely to be contingent on the technological context. In other words, e-services present several research challenges, many of which have not been addressed in the academic literature. The purpose of the special issue is to generate discussion of and cutting-edge research about a rich variety of issues related to e-service. It contains an interesting blend of different research perspectives in order to better understand what is meant by "this thing called e-service".

The central and most widely researched construct in the services domain has been service quality as perceived by customers. The first contribution, therefore, focuses on developing a measurement instrument for assessing Internet retail service quality. Janda, Trocchia and Gwinner have undertaken a two-step approach to identifying the underlying dimensions of this construct. First of all, in-depth interviews were conducted to uncover the various aspects involved in consumers' assessment of the quality of their on-line shopping experience. Five dimensions are reported: performance, access, security, sensation and information. Subsequently, the reliability and validity of multi-item scales for these dimensions as well as the predictive power of the overall scale is assessed by means of a survey. While empirical nuances still have to be made, the results provide service researchers and practitioners with an in-depth insight in the nature of e-service quality.

In the second article, Feinberg and Kadam relate a comprehensive set of e-service attributes to electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) of retail Web sites. The authors take up the challenge of formulating the basic and essential question that service marketing practitioners so frequently confront researchers with: "What is the impact on the bottom line?". In a straightforward and effective manner, the authors demonstrate that, while there is positive relationship between the amount of e-CRM and customer satisfaction with a wide

array of retail Web sites, relatively insignificant features of e-CRM are significantly related to customer satisfaction. Furthermore, there appears to be no relationship between the level of e-CRM on the sites of the Web retailers and sales and profit.

This sobering thought sets the scene for the article by Taylor and Hunter who investigate the impact of loyalty with e-CRM software and e-services. While vendors of e-service support tools position themselves as customer satisfaction brokers, client satisfaction levels do not seem to support this. Based on the results of a large-scale study that incorporates a number of established relationship marketing constructs, the authors conclude that e-CRM marketers may be advised to develop a relationship marketing strategy that is primarily aimed at enhancing customer loyalty. In a final thought to the paper, Taylor and Hunter conclude that the low return on investment for CRM projects may well be attributable to causes that lie within the organization.

The fourth article, "Internet technology and customer linking in Nordic banking", by Nielsen, sets out to explain the adoption of Internet banking services in terms of a number of organizational characteristics and relates financial e-service applications to the performance of the relationship marketing strategy. It is reported that, in addition to the positive relationship between advanced applications and Web site attractiveness, market orientation as well as empowerment have a direct impact on the perceived relationship marketing performance by financial services institutions.

Within the same context, the final contribution to this special issue, by van Dolen and de Ruyter, examines customer satisfaction with on-line moderated group chat (MGC), a new type of e-service. MGC is defined as on-line, real-time interactions between groups of customers with an active coordinating role for a company representative and a commercial objective. The authors report the results of an empirical study in which groups of respondents could chat about two new investment funds under the guidance of a financial advisor. As MGC involves multiple participants and interactions take place within an electronic group environment, predictor-criterion relationships were assessed by means of a multi-level model. The results demonstrate that indeed relationships may vary between the individual and group levels.

The articles in this special issue offer a rich collection of contributions on key issues of one of the dominant themes in the service research domain. I hope that it will serve as a point of departure for further conceptual development and empirical investigations that yield valuable insights for service management practice.

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